Los Angeles

"I dread the fight and am in the dark"

David Douglas and Charlie Hagerty were tending the huge printing press called the "Old Guard," in the moments after midnight on Oct. 1, 1910. General Harrison Gray Otis, USA ret., the militant owner of *The Los Angeles Times,* liked to christen his presses, and adorn them with martial symbols. Otis was a union-hater, and the "Old Guard" had been named to honor the non-union pressmen who broke a printers strike in 1890. It bore the image of a Roman soldier, and the *Times* motto, "Stand Fast, Stand Firm, Stand Sure, Stand True."

It was a busy night at the *Times*. A new press had been installed, requiring a reconfiguration of the basement pressroom. There was confusion, and the paper missed its early deadlines. At 1 a.m., there were still more than a hundred employees in the block-long building, at the northeast corner of Broadway and First St. It was a warm night, and the pressroom windows were open. Late night passers-by could look down on the illuminated scene, and hear the presses roar.

C.G. Varcoe had been sitting on a window sill along Broadway, watching the printers work as he waited for a streetcar. Then, growing impatient, he strolled down the hill toward Spring St. He was halfway down the block when he heard a piercing blast. Turning, Varcoe saw "a column of debris and smoke " rising above the *Times* building. It was followed by a second rumble, "and immediately with the second explosion came the column of flame."

The second detonation had a dull *whump*, like the sound of gas igniting. But there was no mistaking the initial blast. "The first one had," Varcoe said, "the distinctive crack of dynamite."

The explosion, directly above him, threw Douglas to the basement floor. Dazed, he staggered to his feet. There was a sizzling and a cracking noise, and dust and darkness all around. His corner of the pressroom lay just below “Ink Alley,” a street-level passage that opened on Broadway, where barrels of flammable ink were stored. The blast pulverized concrete, snapped iron beams, and slung the floor of the alley down into the basement. Groping through the oily smoke, Douglas found a stairway, and escaped. He never saw Hagerty again.

Harry Chandler’s office adjoined Ink Alley, on the ground floor of the *Times* building. He was the assistant publisher of the newspaper, and the son-in-law of its owner. Chandler had just left for home that night when the explosion obliterated the room and tore the head and limbs from the torso of his dutiful stenographer, J. Wesley Reaves. The next floor up, in the composing room, foreman Simeon Crabill was delivering corrected proofs to a typesetter when a blast that would “jar you inside” parted the boards and timbers beneath his feet. The floor over the alley, he saw, was gone, replaced by a gaping, volcanic opening with “just one solid sheet of flame, shooting up, shutting out the exit.” Crabill watched as John Howard, a copy cutter, raised his arms in mute appeal, and was swallowed by the inferno.

Crabill ran north through a hall of linotype machines, each with its own gas burner, used to keep the lead type pliable. Scattered about were cans of gasoline, to clean ink from the printing plates; saturated rags and paper. He was enveloped in a panicky group of men who bore him toward the open doors of an elevator; they could not see, in the acrid gloom, that the car itself was stuck far below. Crabill and others tumbled into the black shaft, colliding with the walls and cables, and each other, as they fell two stories to the basement. “I heard them shrieking for help,” Crabill recalled. “It was all dark in there…the darkest night on earth right at that spot.” He came upon a conveyor belt used to carry bundles of newspapers to the street, wormed his way up the chute and fell through its now-burning opening to the sidewalk.

“As I looked back the whole Broadway front was a solid mass of flames,” he said.

The news room of the *Times* was on the third floor. Most of the staff had left for the night, but a small crew was on duty, to update later editions and cover breaking news. “My God, they have got us at last,” Elder said, as he and Lovelace had felt the pulse of an “instantaneous blast” of light through the windows along Broadway. Plaster fell from the ceilings, and the arc lights swung wildly above them.

Otis was a despised figure among union men, and the *Times* had been leading the Los Angeles business community in a fierce, violent struggle against Labor that summer. There were racks of rifles in the tower rooms, and shotguns in the newsroom. San Francisco’s unions had been warned by bay area companies that they could not compete with the southland’s non-union shops, and a General Campaign Strike Committee, led by Olaf Tvietmoe of the building trades council, and Darrow’s friend Anton Johannsen, was assembled. Tvietmoe, known as “the Old Man” or “the Viking,” was “a leader among men of his ilk, unscrupulous, defiant of law and audacious in execution,” said James Noel, a city prosecutor. Sluggers sent non-union workers to the hospitals with broken limbs and fractured skulls. The local ironworkers wrote and asked John J. McNamara, treasurer of the national ironworkers union to dispatch “a good live one…not a kid glove man” to organize a campaign to sabotage the city’s non-union iron and structural steel works.

“It was war from the jump,” the *Times* said. The newspaper and the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, an anti-union lobby, led the forces of capital. The M&M hired detectives, spied on the strike’s leaders and pressured local politicians and judges. Its attorney, Earl Rogers, prepared and pushed a new law, banning protests and picketing, through the city council in mid-July. When union men defied the ordnance, dozens were arrested.

And California was just one front in the struggle in the steel industry. More than a hundred explosions had torn up non-union

job sites in New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the Midwest in the two years preceding the *Times* disaster. “Never before…has there been the same kind or class of insurrection,” wrote the press lord E.W. Scripps. “Both sides have adopted…tactics of warfare.”

Elder and Lovelace rushed from stairwell to window, looking in vain for a fire escape, and wound up in a room adjoining the corner tower. As the flames burst from openings on either side of them they joined Harry Crane, a telegraph operator, on a window sill. A group of passing sailors, out on a night’s liberty, tore down an awning from the building across the street, and offered it as a net. Lovelace leapt, and shattered his hip, but the awning saved him. He would live, and have the unique experience of reading his name, mistakenly listed among the dead, in the newspapers. Crane turned back from the window just as a section of the burning structure came crashing down; he vanished into a plume of sparks and flame.

Finally, Elder – who had been horribly burned – crawled out on the ledge, hung by his hands until the heat seared his skin, and dropped. He struck the end of the canvas awning, which tore, and his leg broke as he hit the street. “His back and front were seared and scarred, the skin and flesh hanging like ribbons,” John Beckwith, a reporter, recalled, but Elder urged his rescuers to leave him be, and try to save others. “There is a lot of boys in there yet,” he told them. His colleagues carried him to a nearby hospital, where he remained conscious, and talked with friends for a time, before dying that morning.

My God, they have got us at last. Like poor, doomed Harvey Elder, many in Los Angeles instantly blamed the unions for the blast. The paper’s grieving employees, rallied by Chandler, gathered at an auxiliary plant that had been readied for just such a day, and put a one-page edition on the street that Saturday morning, placing the death toll at 21, with a headline that read, “Unionist Bombs Wreck the Times.”

In the next day's paper, the 73-year-old Otis, a great fierce walrus of a man who had hurried back from a trip to Mexico, denounced the bombers with characteristic vitriol: "O you anarchic scum, you cowardly murderers, you leeches upon honest labor, you midnight assassins, you whose hands are dripping with the innocent blood of your victims, you against whom the wails of poor widows and the cries of fatherless children are ascending to the Great White Throne, go look at the ruins wherein are buried the calcined remains of those whom you murdered."

As a young man, Otis had worked as a union printer, but his military service during the Civil and Spanish-American Wars, and life as a pioneer, entrepreneur and Republican Party functionary had made him one of labor's most outspoken foes. He named his staff his "phalanx" and designed the *Times* building as a fortress, with a statue of a screaming eagle on the highest battlement. Otis was for the "open shop." He "preached that the right to work for whom you please is an inalienable right," said Noel, "and that the right to employ whom you please on such terms as you may agree upon with him, is also an inalienable right."

As the champion of southern California conservatives, and chieftain of a small group of rapacious local business leaders, Otis skewered Socialists, Democrats and liberal Republicans in his choleric screeds, and provoked equally vivid responses. Otis "sits there in senile dementia with gangrene heart and rotting brain, grimacing at every reform, chattering impotently at all things that are decent, frothing, fuming, violently gibbering, going down to his grave in snarling infamy," said Hiram Johnson, on his way to election as governor as a progressive Republican that fall. "Disgraceful, depraved, corrupt, crooked and putrescent – that is Harrison Gray Otis."

The hunt for the killers moved swiftly, on skilled police work, luck, and the blunders of the bombers.

Around noon on Saturday, a suitcase was discovered on the grounds of "The Bivouac," the Wilshire Boulevard home of General Otis. While opening it the police heard a whirring sound,

and ran. They were 60 feet away when the bomb went off, digging a crater and breaking windows in the neighborhood. Another ominous package was discovered by members of the household staff and family at the home of Felix Zeehandelaar, the secretary of the M&M association. This bomb did not explode. A passing motorman carried the bundle to the street, where he carefully unwrapped the newspaper and found 16 sticks of dynamite, wired to an alarm clock. Stamped on the dynamite were the date and place of its manufacture: "Giant Powder Co., Giant, Calif, Sept. 20, 1910."

Within hours, employees at the Giant powder works, across the bay from San Francisco, were interviewed. The company's clerks instantly recalled the three furtive gentlemen who had purchased ten 50-lb. cases of 80 percent dynamite in late September – a far too powerful concentration for their purported purpose, to blow up tree stumps. Thomas Branson, a secretary at Giant, had not liked the looks of the men. "Take a good look at that bugger," he had told a colleague, nodding at one of the trio. "You will probably have to identify him some day." The Giant clerks had demanded references from the three strangers, and saved their names and addresses.

On October 15, the investigators got another break when a landlord stopped in to check on the tenants who were renting a house he owned in San Francisco. The building was deserted, except for a stack of crated dynamite. Chemists matched the dynamite with that used in the Zeehandelaar bomb.

By mid-October, then, the police had acquired the descriptions of three fugitives who had plotted to bomb the *Times* and other West Coast targets. Two of the men were identified as bay area radicals David Caplan and Matthew Schmidt. They were friends of Johannsen, Tvietmoe and other union officials. As they searched for Caplan and Schmidt, and hauled Tvietmoe and others before a grand jury, the authorities worked to identify the mysterious third suspect, a thin-faced man who had gone by the name of "Brice" or "Bryson."

The Zeehandelaar bomb was again the key. On the day of the *Times* disaster, William Burns, the head of a nationally-known detective agency, happened to arrive in Los Angeles to speak at a banking convention. Mayor George Alexander called on Burns at his hotel, and pleaded with him to find the bombers. The detective, a burly, red-haired sleuth with a talent for capturing the public's fancy, examined the "infernal device" found at Zeehandelaar's house, and recognized its features. For months, Burns agents had been working for the industrialists back East, where the "open shop" construction sites – skyscrapers and bridges being built by non-union workers – were being bombed. The device Burns saw in Los Angeles looked just like an unexploded bomb that was recovered from an Illinois bridge site.

It took no imaginative leap to suspect that officials in the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, headquartered in Indianapolis, were behind the bombing campaign. Herbert Hockin, a member of the union's executive board and planner of the bombings, had quarreled with his brethren over money and become an industry informant. By mid-October, he had identified "Brice" as James B. McNamara – an out-of-work printer whose brother was John J. McNamara, the popular treasurer of the ironworkers union. The brothers were a study in contrast. James, 28, with his narrow face and ragged mustache, seemed feral, surly, haggard with nervous energy. John, 34, was the natural politician – clean-shaven and with a ruddy complexion; handsome, bluff and intelligent and blessed with apparent kindness.

James McNamara had arrived in Los Angeles from San Francisco with a suitcase of dynamite on Thursday, Sept. 29. The following evening, at around 5:30 p.m., he planted his infernal device in Ink Alley, about 35 or 40 feet in from Broadway, among a dozen or more 500-lb. wooden barrels of ink. He then bought passage on the Lark, the overnight train to San Francisco, and was leagues away when the bomb went off. "The strikes I witnessed…and the rank injustice that grew out of them made a deep impression on me, and when the opportunity presented itself I

was more than willing to respond," James McNamara recalled. Tvietmoe, he said, was "largely instrumental" for his West Coast assignments. As they searched for James, detectives put his brother John and Ortie McManigal, another union saboteur, under surveillance. But the sleuths lost track of them and the "wrecking crew" launched eight more attacks, including a Christmas Day bombing of the Llewellyn Iron Works in Los Angeles.

Finally, on Saturday, April 22, 1911, police and industry detectives seized John McNamara at union headquarters in Indianapolis and yanked him before a local police court, where a compliant judge okayed an illegal extradition order. The union's other officers were outraged to discover Burns and Walter Drew - the steel industry's union-busting lobbyist and security chief – among those searching their offices. The authorities carted away boxes of incriminating correspondence, 86 sticks of dynamite, and bomb-making materials, including a collection of alarm clocks. Both sides believed their worthy ends justified illegal means. The kidnapping of John McNamara was an "unlawful thing," Drew acknowledged, in a letter to Burns. But "this we did in the interests of justice, and personally I would do it over again."

McNamara was taken on the *California Limited*, a high-speed train to Los Angeles. On board were his brother James and McManigal, who had been seized with a suitcase of dynamite, on their way to their next job, and held without counsel for ten days in a house near Chicago. McManigal made a full confession, but James tried to bribe his guards, offering them $5,000, then $10,000 and ultimately $30,000 for his freedom.

They might as well take it, he told them, or the money would go to Clarence Darrow.